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ABSTRACT

Change may be personal, professional, social, or spiritual; or, all aspects of life may be affected simultaneously. Coping with change requires directing and controlling individual resources. Change reactions can be described as: (1) a sense of loss as the transition is experienced; (2) a need to grieve due to the loss experienced; and (3) a need to complete the grief process, so that closure takes place. Individuals or organizations that refuse to change and adapt their paradigms or mission become non-existent. The idea of loss as the result of on-going change is apparent in organizational life whether the organization is corporate, educational, social, or spiritual in nature. On the professional level, downsizing, reorganization, and technology have become buzzwords in modern corporate organizations. Retraining and adaptation to education as a lifelong process are challenging the traditional assumptions of the three stages of life--education, work, and retirement. Process is an important concept associated with change (becoming different) and it involves both moving from the known to the unknown and making corresponding adjustments and modifications. Indicators associated with change suggest that throughout the process of change and change management, the communication behaviors of an individual become more inner-directed and less tolerant of others. Research suggests that support is perceived only when parallel experiences are shared. In addition to research, however, people need to be taught how to grieve and that grieving is an acceptable form of behavior in any type of loss situation. (Contains a list of 37 resources and 3 figures.) (NKA)

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Change, Loss, Grief and Communication

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Change, Loss, Grief and Communication

Frame of Reference

It only takes one sentence . . .

You're hired.
You've been promoted.
You're fired.
I now pronounce you husband and wife.
You're pregnant.
We're moving.
You have cancer.
You've tested HIV positive.
You're the new president of the organization.
Your baby doesn't have a left hand.
You have just won $5 million in the lottery.

Your whole world is changed. Your definition of tomorrow, next week, or even next year is no longer the same. You are no longer the same. You will never be the same again. The need for new definitions of self, your world, and your relationship with your world looms on the horizon. Life expectations must be modified. Where once you were consumed by a purpose, that purpose is fulfilled or has changed. There is a let-down; you are adrift--e.g., the "yellow ribbon workers" during the Gulf Crisis. The power/control you were exercising over your life has been called into question and must be reasserted. Your paradigms are shifting. You are confronted with that infamous thing called "change."

Change is a part of life; it cannot be avoided. Change involves passing from one state to another; it means becoming altered, different, partially or wholly transformed [Webster, 1983, p. 302]. Change comes in a variety of sizes and shapes and with varying degrees of intensity. It may be a personal, professional, social, or spiritual change; or, all aspects of our life may be affected simultaneously. Change does not discriminate nor does it schedule an appointment so that it doesn't conflict with the other demands on your time or energies. Change creates tension and demands a move from the known to the unknown. Coping with change requires directing and controlling our resources.

Change and Resultant Losses

Change involves forfeiting identities, wants, and beliefs about ourselves, our lives, and the significant others in our lives. Losses occur on a continual, intermittent basis. The attachments a person has to all the elements that make up daily life (i.e., home, family, community, job, co-workers, social units, self image, etc.) have the potential to become losses. Judith Viorst acknowledges the extensive nature of loss in life when she comments: " . . . we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on." [Viorst, p. 15] The dynamic nature of change causes a great variety of human reactions. These change reactions can be described as: 1) a sense of loss as the transition is experienced; 2) a need to grieve due to the loss experience; and, 3) a need to complete the grief process. Completion of this process--obtaining closure--is necessary if ownership of the change is to occur [Geddes and Thomson, 1991]. This change/loss/grief/ownership (CLGO) process is illustrated in the following diagram. (Figure 1)

- - - - - INSERT _____ DIAGRAM (Figure 1) HERE - - - - - -

Without establishment of ownership, any given change is not effectively completed. Completion of the process facilitates the individual's continuing ability to deal with change.

A change and the corresponding transition process carry an intrinsic value. That value may be positive or negative. The importance of that value construct cannot be overlooked in examining the impact of a change, the realization of a loss, and the need to grieve the given loss.

Attention also must be given to the fact that there might be disparities in change values. The following diagram suggests relationships in a change response value construct.

- - - - - INSERT _____ DIAGRAM HERE (FIGURE 2)

An example of disparate value constructs can be found in the idea of personnel evaluation in corporations. For an organization, the personnel evaluation process is essential to the maintenance and development of an effective work force. It allows for and supports a monitoring of the most valuable organizational resource--people. Consequently, from the organizational viewpoint, personnel evaluation is a positive activity. However, to an individual employee, personnel evaluation can be negatively loaded. Another year of the employee's life is gone; what has or has not been achieved is an issue. If an employee has reached a plateau in his performance, the question of perceived loss of "mountains to climb" can present a problem. Does the employee feel trapped? He may be asking, "is this all there is?" Has the employee reached the level of his ability; has motivation been lost; what changes have occurred? The personnel review process can illuminate a variety of ways and differing levels of change an individual is experiencing in his professional life. As a result, personnel evaluation can be considered a type of grief activity, endemic to organizational life. The results and implications of personnel evaluation can impact the employee's personal life and well as his professional life. Communication processes and practices associated with personnel evaluations should be examined accordingly.

Losses, when applied to each of our lives, demand a series of redefinitions of self, our world as we see it and our relationship with our world. The effect of any given loss is compounded by the fact that a person can be: 1) grieving more than one loss at any given time, and 2) experiencing, simultaneously, different stages of grief for different losses. It is important to acknowledge that different types of losses hold different levels of importance for each individual. Consequently, reaction to a loss and the intensity of the grieving process will vary among losses. To illustrate, grief can be put on a continuum from nonessential losses, e.g., cancelling an anticipated dinner engagement or not getting new carpet for the office, to essential losses, e.g., the death of a loved one or losing a job. Despite the type of loss (personal or professional) or the importance of the loss (essential or nonessential), change demands cognitive restructuring of a person's world. An individual has to work through his feeling(s) of loss and make the corresponding life changing decisions. He also has to take actions appropriate to carrying out his decisions if he is to claim ownership of the change. The result can be threatening; it means facing a new and different world and starting all over. Change, the perceived loss, and resulting grief create a new and different person and a new and different life.

Personal vs. Professional Losses

No one can develop immunity from the effects of change, loss or grief. Individuals as well as organizations play the roles of initiators and recipients in the change/loss/grief/ownership milieu. Individuals or organizations that refuse to change and adapt their paradigms or mission become non-existent.

On the personal level, the changing nature of the extended family as a social organization and such commonplace occurrences as a wedding, the birth of a child, or the purchase of a home test a person's definition and perception of his world. Becoming different through the aging process, value reassessment, personal trauma, or accident and disease are but a few of the internal change forces pressing on the individual. To illustrate, the diagnosis of cancer affects both the patient and the significant others in the patient's lives. Everyone involved is concerned with what constitutes "safe yet meaningful talk." Attention must be given to restructuring daily habits to allow for medical treatment, exercise, relaxtion strategies, and other behaviors relevant to the healing or treatment process. The question of mortality invades the consciousness of all involved. In this and other change situations, relationships with family and friends, and other professionals bring situational factors into the forces of change.

The idea of loss as the result of on-going change is also apparent in organizational life whether the organization is corporate, educational, social, or spiritual in nature. On the professional level, downsizing, reorganization, and technology have become buzz words in modern, corporate organizations. Retraining and adaptation to education as a lifelong process are challenging the traditional assumptions of the three stages of life--education, work, and retirement. To illustrate, a department head is promoted to area supervisor. He subsequently gains a new job title and new job responsibilities. The change means a new role and corresponding changes in role definition within the context of his job, relationships with his co-workers, and the organizational structure. Additionally, a ripple effect may filter into his private life--particularly if the responsibilities of the new position have different power or time demands associated with them. Promotion in hand, the individual finds himself in a state of transition--from the known to the unknown. A transition that causes a need to restructure his professional world and make appropriate changes in his personal life.

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to separate with any clear degree of definitiveness those change occurrences with impact upon a person's personal life from those which impact upon the professional life. The holistic view of an individual is a much more practical approach. For example, the failure to obtain a strongly sought after promotion at work or the experience of a divorce at home will produce ramifications in the opposing segments of one's life.

The spastic nature of change and the overwhelming manner in which the flood of uncertainty can besiege a person in both his personal and professional life gives credence to a variety of questions. For example, how do different individuals relate to others during various types of change? Do sex, age, or role definition influence a person's response pattern to change? Does the value attached to the change influence a person's response pattern? Do the reactions of significant others influence a person's response pattern? What is the impact of a personal loss upon professional productivity? What is the effect of a professional loss upon private life? How does change influence communication strategies? The potential list of questions is unending.

Change, Loss and the Grief Process

At this point, it is important to highlight the concept of process as it is associated with change (becoming different) and as it involves both moving from the known to the unknown and making the corresponding adjustments and modifications. By definition, process suggests a particular procedure for doing something; a procedure that involves a number of steps or operations. A procedure that a person must experience to facilitate lifestyle transitions, experience personal growth, maintain a semblance of balance in life, and establish ownership of change--this is my new world, this is who I am now, and

this is how I fit into my new world. Associated with this procedure of adaptation is a grief strategy involving skills that can be identified, analyzed, and learned.

From this premise, grief, traditionally associated with death, assumes new dimensions. Grief and grieving become part of the total life process. Grieving involves constantly redefining and maintaining sense of self, goals, and perceived quality of life and living.

Research on grief as it relates to death and dying, repeatedly suggests that when loss occurs, a grieving process also occurs. The individual will experience a series of conditions or states of being for varying periods of time. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross a renowned authority on grief, the grieving process, and death and dying, outlines the grieving process. The first stage is associated with denial, the "no, not me" syndrome. The second stage, anger, focuses upon "why me?" Bargaining follows and is usually considered an attempt to forestall the change; this is also the "what if" stage [Kubler-Ross, p. 83]. Depression and "life isn't fair, poor me" follows next [Kubler-Ross, p. 98]. The final step in the process is acceptance, "that's it" [Kubler-Ross, p. 112].

----- INSERT _____ GP MODEL (FIGURE 3) HERE ---

In the final step, the individual concedes to ownership of the change and starts finalizing the redefinition process. The stage of acceptance can also described as a period of struggling to affirm reality [Westbert, 1971] and as an acceptance of loss and reaffirmation of life [Oates, 1981].

It is important to realize that the grieving process is never as clearly defined and ordered as the preceding descriptions might suggest. A multitude of factors influence a person's ability to experience and cope with loss and the accompanying grief process. It is not the fact of the loss or change that occurs, but the individual's inner emotional events, fears, and frustrations that are at issue [Switzer, 1978].

Completion of a grieving process moves one on toward healthy personal or organizational functioning. Unresolved and accumulated grief can have a negative effect upon successful, productive life-changing adjustments. Examples of unresolved grief may include any or all of the following: lack of effective personal adjustment to a major shift in roles within a dual career marriage, a divorce, a spouse changing jobs, children starting or leaving for school, a medical diagnosis, loss of material possessions in a natural disaster, or moving to a new environment. Unresolved grief in the professional area may include: a new boss, a change in policy or procedures. Examples of accumulated professional grief can be as unobtrusive as a new assignment, a pass-over for a raise or repeated denial of annual leave. Any one of these activities can disable a person. More than one loss, happening over a short time span, can be devastating for a person raised in a society that associates grief only with death and dying. Unfortunately, our society is not comfortable with either "loss," grief or the grieving process; I would question if we are comfortable with redefinition. Our discomfort may be, in part, because we are not taught how to grieve or that grieving is an acceptable behavior. It is my contention that part of our difficulty in dealing with loss and the grieving process is influence by our need to believe we have at least some degree of control over our lives and what happens to/in them.

When the grief process is not completed in an effective manner, the individual will carry the unresolved grief as part of his/her emotional baggage and will have to come back at some point in the future and get closure. Closure must be achieved before the individual can claim ownership of the change and incorporate the change as an acceptable part of his/her redefined self and world.

Being aware of an expected change and experiencing the actual process of the change are different. As Rando acknowledges, awareness of an impending loss is not equal to participation in the process of anticipatory grief [Rando, 1986]. Often people can be " . . . explicitly informed but refuse to believe, ignore or misunderstand the warnings . . . " [Rando, p. 7]. This is exemplified on the personal level by the repeated warnings of the negative impact of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco upon an individual's health. Yet, the insistence of many Americans to continue to indulge themselves. It is exemplified in organization life when employees receive notices or signals that impending changes will occur. On occasion, the date and time of the planned change are included in the notice. Until the employees are confronted face-to-face with the change, however, they pretend the change will not happen and order their lives on a "business as usual basis." This type of behavior is particularly noticeable in cases of corporate downsizing where employees receive notice that staff cuts are planned and their positions will be abolished effective on a given date. Refusal to believe termination will actually occur allows employees to continue following established work habits rather than start a job search or retraining program. When final termination notices actually appear, complaints of unfairness are loudly voiced; anger and hostility invade the work site and organization life.

Mourning is experienced over the loss of a variety of factors. Loss of control over a personal or professional life becomes a reality. Loss of power associated with a given role(s) is felt. The sense of respect is lost or changed. Relationships, interactions, liaisons, networks, and communication channels are changed. The focus of the grief and grieving is on that which is lost and will never again be. A thorough reassessment of self is necessitated. Who am I? What is my world? How is the new me related to the new world?

Change and Communication

Indicators associated with change suggest that throughout the process of change and change management, the communication behaviors of an individual become more inner-directed and less tolerant of others. A person's ability to listen also seems negatively influenced. Psychological noise and inner dialogue become such dominant forces that they take precedence over external communications and tend to distort those external communications. Consequently, traditional approaches of offering verbal statements of comfort and "a pat on the back," are inadequate to meet the situation(s). Galanes and Berquist report the concept of empathy as it relates to supportive communication is an issue that bears examination [1991]. Their research suggests that support is perceived only when parallel experiences are shared.

There are a plethora of questions that need to be answered regarding appropriate responses to claiming ownership of change as described earlier in this paper. For example, as an individual wanting to provide social support, what strategies can be employed to relay concern and caring? How do those strategies differ among types of grief situations and across the generations? How do roles influence support strategies? For an individual needing support, what constitutes an acceptable request or acceptable behavior? What makes up a meaningful support system?

On an organizational level, what kind of systems or resources are needed to support effective grieving as it relates to the individual employee and changes in his/her organization life? What provision, if any, needs to be made for the verification of the importance of change to differing types of employees? At what point, if any, do organizational support systems become an invasion of an employee's private life?

These are only a few of the questions to be explored. Answers are needed if we are to be able to meet and cope with the increasingly dynamic nature of the world in which we live. In addition to research, however, we need to teach

people how to grieve and that grieving is an acceptable form of behavior in any type of loss situation. We need to structure organizations so that they incorporate support systems as an integral part of their overall structure. We need to recognize that until an individual claims ownership of change by going through the grieving process, he/she does not achieve a closure that allows them to "move on." Human interaction and growth, particularly communication and the communication process, become a victim of an individual's ability to claim ownership of change.

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CLGO PROCESS

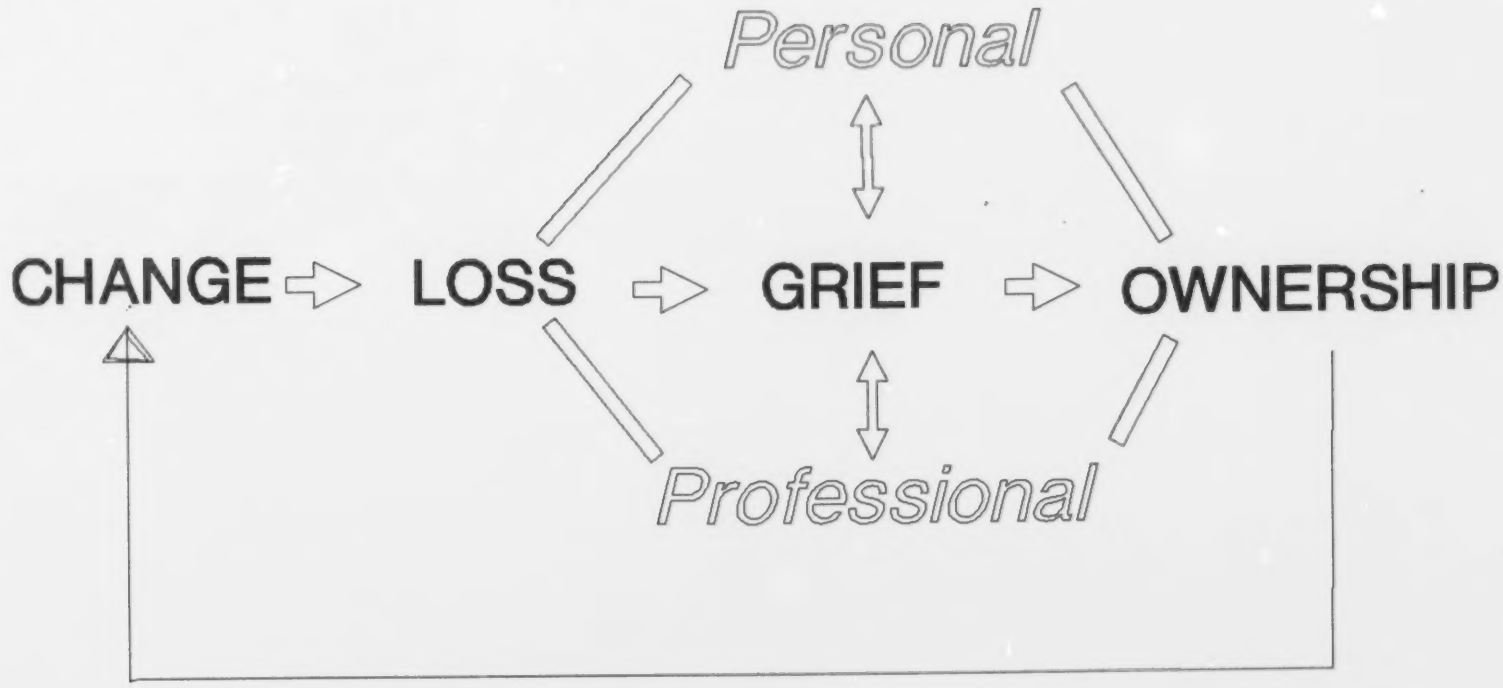

Figure 1

CHANGE RESPONSE
VALUE CONSTRUCT

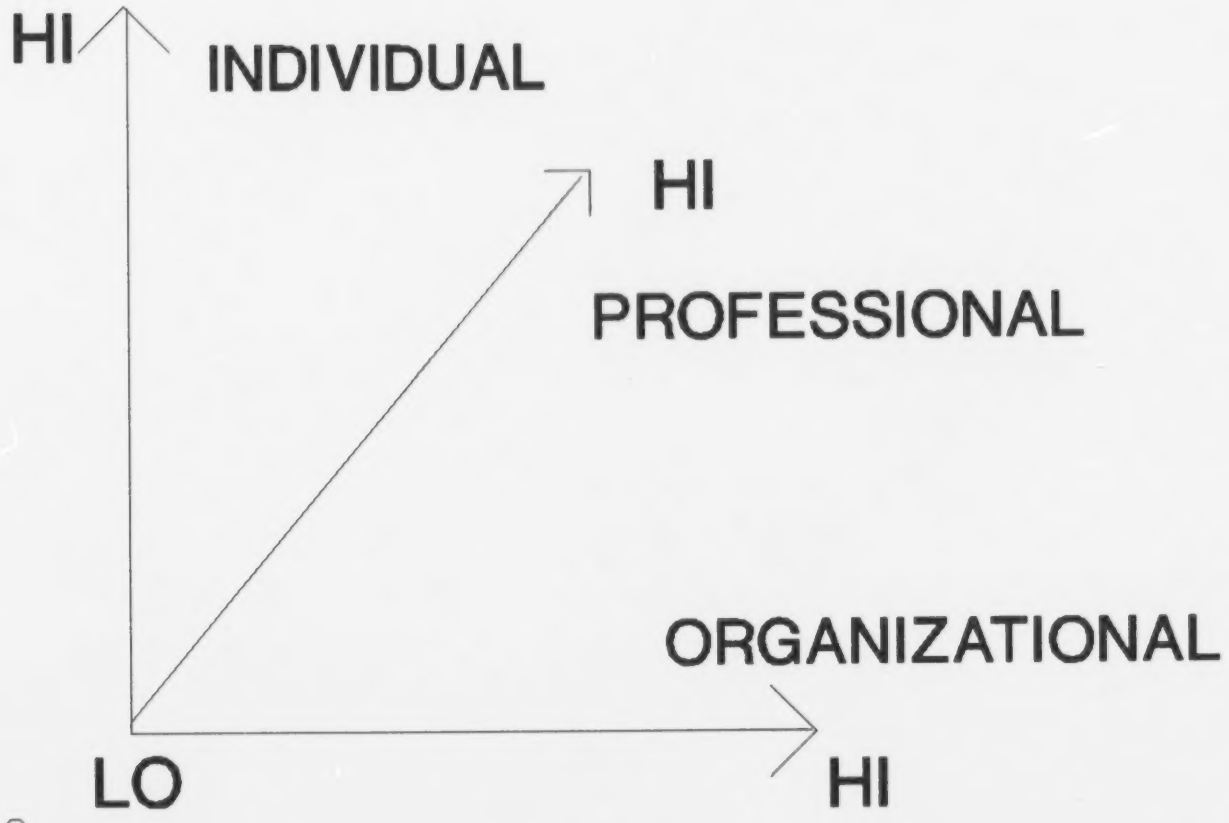

Figure 2

GRIEVING PROCESS

Figure 3 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, ON DEATH AND DYING, 1970.

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